

Message Text

SECRET

PAGE 01 DAMASC 04036 01 OF 02 161111Z
ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 INRE-00 NSCE-00 DODE-00
CIAE-00 /026 W

-----053494 161112Z /10

O 151137Z JUL 78

FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8789

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

AMAMEBASSY JIDDA 2219

AMEMBASSY LONDON

USMISSION USUN

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 4036

EXDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (TEXT PARA 6 CORRECTED)

LONDON FOR ATHERTON/ SAUNDERS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PEPR, SY, XF

SUBJ: SYRIA AND THE PEACE PROCESS

1. FONMIN KHADDAM WAS NOT PARTICULARLY INTERESTED IN THE LONDON TALKS DURING OUR DISCUSSION JULY 12 (DAMASCUS 3975). THIS IS HARDLY SURPOISING GIVEN THE EVENTS IN LEBANON. NEVERTHELESS, HIS ATTITUDE MAY REFLECT MORE THAN THAT OF A HARASSED OFFICIAL SPENDING MOST OF HIS WAKING HOURS ON CRISIS MANAGEMENT.

2. FOR ONE THING, WHILE THE LONDON TALKS AND THEIR AFTER-
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PAGE 02 DAMASC 04036 01 OF 02 161111Z

MATH HAVE THEIR POTENTIAL PITFALLS FOR SYRIA'S CURRENT POLICY (THE U.S. MAY GET SOME MEANINGFUL CONCESSIONS FOR BEGIN, JORDAN MAY DECIDE TO JOIN IN PROCESS, SADAT MAY OPT FOR A SEPARATE PEACE), THE SYRIANS DO NOT REALLY BELIEVE ANY OF THESE SCENARIOS WILL COME TO PASS. THEY ARE CONFIDENT THAT SOONER OR LATER THE SADAT PROCESS WILL GRIND TO A HALT DUE TO PRECEIVED ISRAELI INTRANSIGENCE.

3. FOR ANOTHER, KHADDAM REFLECTED THE ATTITUDE OF A MAN WHO HAS SAID IT ALL BEFORE. IT IS AS IF SYRIAN THINKING ON THE PEACE PROCESS WENT INTO COLD STORAGE THE DAY SADAT WENT TO JERUSALEM. WHAT CONCERNS US IS THAT THE LONGER SYRIA STAYS OUT OF THE PEACE PROCESS, THE MORE ANACHRONISTIC ITS THINKING BECOMES AND THE HARDER IT WILL BE TO TURN THE PROCESS AROUND, ASSUMING A COMPREHENSIVE AGREEMENT REMAINS OUR GOAL. THE PROBLEM IS THAT, GIVEN THE SYRIAN PERSPECTIVE RIGHT NOW, IT IS PROBABLY THEY SEE NO URGENCY TO ENGAGE IN SERIOUS NEGOTIATIONS FOR AT LEAST ANOTHER TWO YEARS.

4. THE PRESIDENT OF THE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE, MUHSIN BILAL, TOLD US RECENTLY THAT THE REAL ARGUMENT ASSAD HAS WITH SADAT IS THAT THE LATTER IS PREPARED TO NEGOTIATE WITH ISRAEL IN SPITE OF A FLAGRANT CASE OF ARAB POLITICAL AND MILITARY ANEMIA. ASSAD PROBABLY CANNOT GET OVER HIS MILITARY TRAINING WHICH TELLS HIM YOU DO NOT CHOOSE TO GO INTO BATTLES WITHOUT, AT A MINIMUM, APPROACHING PARITY WITH YOUR OPPONENT. BILAL'S AND PROBABLY ASSAD'S, VIEW OF THE SITUATION IS BASED ON THE ASSUMPTION THAT THE UNITED STATES HAS LONG HELD A SERIOUS MISCONCEPTION OF THE ISRAELI BODY POLITIC. THE U.S. HELD THAT ONLY AN OVERWHELMINGLY STRONG ISRAEL COULD MAKE CONCESSIONS.

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PAGE 03 DAMASC 04036 01 OF 02 161111Z

BILAL SUGGESTED THAT WE COMPARE ISRAELI ATTITUDES TOWARD THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES AFTER THE 1973 WAR AND NOW. KISSINGER WAS INITIALLY SUCCESSFUL BECAUSE THERE WAS "RELATIVE MILITARY PARITY" BETWEEN THE ARABS AND THE ISRAELIS. AS HE DESTROYED THIS PARITY MILITARILY AND POLITICALLY THROUGH MASSIVE ARMS SUPPLY AND BY SINAI II, HE FOUND DECREASING GIVE IN ISRAEL'S POLICY.

5. ASSAD, ACCORDING TO BILAL, DOES BELIEVE PEACE IS POSSIBLE, BUT ONLY WHEN PARITY WITH ISRAEL IS ESTABLISHED BY THREE FACTORS COALESCING: 1) AT ARABS ARE SUFFICIENTLY UNITED TO COORDINATE THEIR POLITICAL AND MILITARY POLICIES; 2) THE UNITED STATES IS POLITICALLY UNITED BEHIND THE ADMINISTRATION IN SEEKING A JUST SOLUTION TO THE MIDDLE EAST PROBLEMS; 3) ARAB ARMIES ON BOTH SOUTHERN AND NORTHERN FRONTS ARE SUFFICIENTLY STRONG TO POSE A CREDIBLE THREAT TO ISRAEL (NOT TO ITS EXISTENCE BUT TO ITS MANPOWER)

6. THE POINT IS THAT BILAL'S THREE FACTORS CANNOT COALESCE FOR SOMETHING TO COME, IF EVER, SOME FORM OF

ARAB UNITY MAY WELL BE DEvised IF THE SADAT INITIATIVE IS ABANDONED (AS SYRIA BELIEVES IT WILL BE), BUT WHILE SYRIA IS BOGGED DOWN IN LEBANON IT CAN HARDLY ANTICIPATE POSING ANY REAL THREAT TO ISRAEL. ACCORDING TO BILAL, EVEN IF LEBANON COULD BE SOMEWHAT STABILIZED IN A YEAR THE UNITED STATES WOULD BE CAUGHT IN THE THROES OF A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION. IN SHORT, WE WONDER IF SYRIA IS NOT THINKING OF NOVEMBER 1980 AS THE THRESHOLD FOR ANY SERIOUS NEGOTIATIONS.

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PAGE 01 DAMASC 04036 02 OF 02 151312Z
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USMISSION USUN
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

S E C R E T SECTION 2 OF 2 DAMASCUS 4036

EXDIS

LONDON FOR ATHERTON/ SAUNDERS

7. AS FOR HOW THE SYRIANS SEE US GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE WITHOUT A DANGEROUS VACUUM IN THE NEGOTIATING PROCESS, SYRIANS, AND BILAL AMONG THEM, HAVE SPOKEN OF THE NEED TO GO BACK TO THE JOINT U.S.-SOVIET STATEMENT IN GENEVA. IN THE SAME BREATH THEY TALK ABOUT THE EXAMPLE OF THE VIET-NAM NEGOTIATIONS WHICH DRAGGED ON FOR YEARS. THE SYRIANS MAY WELL SEE GENEVA OR TALKING ABOUT GENEVA AS A WAY TO MARK TIME AND STAVE OFF THE THREAT OF WAR WHILE THEY SEEK TO RESOLVE THE LEBANON EMBROGLIO, BUILD THEIR STRENGTH VIS-A-VIS ISRAEL, AND ALLOW THE PROCESS OF SHIFTING U.S., AND MAYBE EVEN ISRAELI, OPINION TO GERMINATE.

8. CLEARLY, IF THE USG WERE TO CONCLUDE THAT A REAL
CHANCE FOR PROGRESS IN PEACE TALKS EXISTS IN THE SHORT
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PAGE 02 DAMASC 04036 02 OF 02 151312Z

TERM EITHER THROUGH THE SADAT FRAMEWORK OR SOME
EXPANDED FRAMEWORK, THEN IT WOULD FOLLOW THAT SYRIA,
GIVEN ITS APPROACH, MIGHT HINDER THAT PROGRESS. WE
SHOULD NOT GO OUT OF OUR WAY TO PRECEDURALLY GERRY-
MANDER A FRAMEWORK TO MEET SYRIAN SPECIFICATIONS.

9. HOWEVER, IF WE CONCLUDE THAT THE PEACE PROCESS
IS NOT GOING ANYWHERE FAST, IT MIGHT BE WORTHWHILE
TO MAKE A START AT TRYING TO BRING THE SYRIANS BACK
INTO THE PROCESS. EVEN A PROTRACTED AND POSSIBLY
STERILE PROCESS HAS THE ADVANTAGE OF HELPING
TO STAVE OFF THE THREAT OF WAR AND PREVENTING POSSIBLE
SYRIAN DRIFT TOWARD REJECTION. IT SHOULD BE REMEM-
BERED THAT SYRIA WAS VERY HESITANT ABOUT ENTERING A
GENEVA NEGOTIATION FRAMEWORK WHICH IS FEARED WOULD
WIND UP IN FAILURE. SYRIA FORESAW A PROTRACTED
PERIOD OF INDIRECT NEGOTIATION PRIOR TO ACTUALLY
GOING TO GENEVA. EVEN THIS PROCESS OF REENGAGEMENT
COULD FORCE SYRIA INTO DECISIONS, BY VIRTUE OF ITS
INVOLVEMENTS WITH OTHER ARAB STATES, WHICH IT WOULD
OTHERWISE BE UNWILLING TO MAKE. ONE THING IS CLEAR,
SYRIA HAS MOVED VERY LITTLE IF AT ALL OVER THE PAST
SIX MONTHS IN ITS THINKING ABOUT PEACE AND THIS,
IF IT CONTINUES, DOES NOT AUGUR WELL IN THE LONG
RUN FOR A COMPREHENSIVE PEACE.
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